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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000501

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY  
DRL/NESA FOR WHITMAN, BARGHOUT  
USUN FOR WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER  
NSC FOR SHAPIRO, MCDERMOTT  
OVP FOR HMUSTAFA  
DOD/OSD FOR FLOURNOY/KAHL/DALTON

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEAGEA ON GHAJAR, GENERALS, AND  
POST-ELECTION SCENARIOS

REF: BEIRUT 466

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a May 5 meeting with the Ambassador, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea said Israel should stress the implementation of UNSCR 1701 as justification for a withdrawal from Ghajar village. He believed that while the Special Tribunal for Lebanon's (STL) authorization for the release of four detained officers had initially been a blow to March 14, the officers' media appearances as well as Hizballah's reaction had turned public opinion against the March 8 opposition. He suggested that March 14 and the U.S. government begin designing a post-election plan of action, as he believes Hizballah will take up arms again, either to insist on a blocking minority in the cabinet, or to demonstrate its refusal to cooperate with the STL.

2. (C) Geagea was extremely confident about March 14's chances in the June 7 parliamentary elections -- and extremely negative about Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's -- offering his predictions for the results of several districts. He explained the electoral significance of the Armenian community in Lebanon and its focus on larger regional, rather than local, issues. He said Saudi money provided in support of March 14 had been badly mismanaged and was already spent, and as a result the Saudis would offer no further funds. He suggested the best U.S. message in advance of the elections would be a strong one in support of the Tribunal and Lebanese institutions, but cautioned against publicly threatening not to deal with an opposition-led government. End summary.

ISRAEL AND GHAJAR:  
FOCUS ON 1701

3. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/EconOff, called on Samir Geagea at his office in Maarab May 5. Geagea advisors Elie Khoury and Joseph Nehme also attended the meeting. Geagea complained to the Ambassador about a May 3 article in

the Israeli newspaper Haaretz alleging that Israeli PM Netanyahu will announce Israel's withdrawal from northern Ghajar "to show support for Siniora and March 14." He called the article "awkward," saying, "This just makes us look bad, that Israel is doing it for us. It would have been much better if they pointed to UNSCR 1701, to push everyone to apply it to the letter." He believed Israel should follow up on its justification for the withdrawal under international law by stressing the importance of Lebanon and Syria following suit. This would step up pressure to halt weapons smuggling to Hizballah across the Syrian border, said Geagea.

OPPOSITION RESPONSE TO  
GENERALS' RELEASE BACKFIRING  
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¶4. (C) Geagea assessed that the release of four officers held on suspicion of involvement in former PM Rafiq Hariri's murder "demoralized" the average March 14 supporter initially, and was interpreted as a sign that Syria and its allies had nothing to do with the assassination. Nonetheless, Geagea gauged that the officers, particularly former Surete General head Jamil Sayyed, had overplayed their hand in the media, reminding the Lebanese of their nasty pasts. "Jamil Sayyed is a hated figure," said Geagea, "and in the past few days, he has talked too much." Sayyed and Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah's attacks on the Lebanese judiciary were a tactical error, according to Geagea. Geagea called a press conference May 4 to counter the claims and highlight Nasrallah's claim that he would not cooperate with the Tribunal as a rejection of the justice of the

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international community. He said the tide had turned on this issue, and the opposition's position on the officers and the STL was backfiring.

"GET WASHINGTON TO THINK  
ABOUT AFTER THE ELECTIONS"  
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¶5. (C) Geagea hypothesized that the Hizballah-led opposition would turn to violence after the elections, either to insist on maintaining a blocking third in cabinet upon a March 14 victory, or in response to an indictment or request from the STL. He said Hizballah was afraid of the Tribunal, and its plan was to "blemish the image" of the court and hinder its function. He believed Hizballah would refuse to hand over any suspects from its ranks, and would label the Tribunal as politicized, backing up its statements with military action in the streets. Geagea suggested that the U.S. should work with March 14 to develop a plan to counter such actions.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador stressed the importance of keeping prominent figures from smaller parties, such as Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb, in the mix, and asked if Druze leader Walid Jumblatt had fully reconciled with his March 14 colleagues following his leaked remarks criticizing Sunni and Christian populations (reftel). Geagea replied that March 14 would need to prepare itself for the real work of opposition, but it would recover from its internal electoral feuds and do so. He even gave Jumblatt a grade of "C" for his reconciliation efforts, and said they were on good terms. He claimed he and Kataeb leader Amine Gemayel (still hospitalized for cardiac problems) had no problems now that their electoral lists were formed, but noted that he and Saad Hariri had two remaining candidate disputes -- one in Beirut 1 and one in Akkar. He referred to Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury's continued candidacy in the Chouf -- despite not being chosen for the March 14 list -- as one of the "nuisances" of elections. He said he was confident, however, that these issues would be ironed out.

¶7. (C) Geagea believed President Michel Sleiman would continue in his role as mediator between the majority and the opposition following the elections. He strongly criticized

continuing an opposition blocking third in cabinet, and suggested perhaps the minority plus the president could appoint the blocking third instead, reducing the chances of its use. He rejected the idea of the president appointing a larger number of ministers than his current three, claiming that the president's ministerial appointees are constrained in positions they take in cabinet meetings and do not take strong positions: "We (March 14) have to fight Hizballah all by ourselves," he said.

"I HAVE NEVER BEEN  
WORRIED ABOUT MARCH 14"

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18. (C) Geagea presented the Ambassador with the somewhat surprising prediction that Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun and his Change and Reform Bloc would win only 12-15 seats in the new parliament (compared to 21 currently), and therefore should not play a large role in any government formed. The Ambassador followed up, asking how March 14 would do in specific primarily-Christian districts. Geagea claimed March 14 would take three or four seats in the Metn (out of eight), as well as in Zahle (out of seven). He called Jbeil a "disaster," implying that his alliance would lose all three seats because of independent Nazem Khoury's refusal to run with March 14 SYG Fares Souaid. He believed FPM's Gebran Bassil would definitely lose in Batroun, giving both the Christian seats there to March 14. He acknowledged that March 14 would lose seats compared to its 2005 numbers in Baabda, Zgharta, and Koura, but thought independents in Keserwan might take two seats. "We have made a lot of mistakes in preparing the elections, but I have never been worried," he said. (Comment: Just in the districts

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mentioned -- which exclude districts such as Jezzine, where Aoun will definitely win seats -- using Geagea's very optimistic estimates, Aoun's bloc would win 14 seats. Most pollsters believe Aoun's bloc will easily win more than 20 seats, and Suleiman Franjeh's Marada Party -- which sits in Hizballah's parliamentary bloc -- will take at least two formerly March 14 seats in Zgharta. End comment.)

TASHNAQ ARMENIANS AND  
THE REGIONAL PICTURE

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19. (C) Geagea believed the Armenian Tashnaq party, despite a history of allying with the President, would remain allied with Michel Aoun following the elections. He acknowledged that Tashnaq politicians in Lebanon are western-minded and "ideologically closer to me than to Aoun," but said their "scope is bigger than Lebanon," and their political and business interests are in Iran and Syria. He noted that four Tashnaq ministers had just resigned from the Armenian government in protest of a new Turkish-Armenian agreement to improve diplomatic ties, and pointed out that there are more Armenians in Syria than in Lebanon, providing a natural link for Armenian-Lebanese businessmen and politicians. Geagea suggested the U.S. should include Armenian-Lebanese in any analysis of regional policy. (Note: In a May 5 meeting with Pol/Econ Chief (septel), Tashnaq MP Hagop Pakradounian said his party would side with the President in case of any dispute with Aoun, but he did not anticipate any such dispute. End note.)

NO MORE SAUDI MONEY

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110. (C) Geagea told the Ambassador that all the money Saudi Arabia had given to Saad Hariri in support of March 14's electoral campaign had been spent before the end of 2008. He said Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury had been in charge of budgeting the money, and had mismanaged it terribly, including on his election campaign in the Chouf, where he was not a March 14 candidate. Geagea said the Saudis were upset

about the mismanagement, and refused to give more money. Nonetheless, Geagea believed Hariri would ultimately forgive Khoury for his profligacy, because "Hariri is a good person."

U.S. MESSAGE: SUPPORT TRIBUNAL  
STATE INSTITUTIONS  
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¶11. (C) Geagea said Secretary Clinton's message during her April 26 visit to Beirut, advocating free elections unmarred by violence, was viewed as a positive one. Going forward, he believed, the U.S. should focus on continuing to express support for the STL, stressing that as an international body created by the United Nations under Chapter VII, no country or entity (read Syria or Hizballah) can ignore its demands. He added that continued strong support for the institutions of the Lebanese state would be helpful, but "other than that, just be quiet," he said. He noted in particular that the U.S. should not give the impression that it will not deal with an opposition-led government, or threaten to withdraw assistance, actions he believed would harm moderates more than help them.

COMMENT  
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¶12. (C) Geagea's calculations of Aoun's electoral chances are surprisingly out of line from what we and pollsters are predicting. However, his concern about post-election Hizballah violence in the case of a March 14 victory is a valid one. Now that March 14 electoral lists are almost complete, the leadership finally seems to be coming together in the final month of campaigning for a victory on June 7. End comment.

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